

1 Introduction



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The mallard is one of the featured waterfowl species at the North Dakota refuges.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has developed a draft comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) to provide the foundation for the management and use of 12 national wildlife refuges in North Dakota (see figure 1, vicinity map):

- Audubon National Wildlife Refuge
- Chase Lake National Wildlife Refuge
- Kellys Slough National Wildlife Refuge
- Lake Alice National Wildlife Refuge
- Lake Ilo National Wildlife Refuge
- Lake Nettie National Wildlife Refuge
- Lake Zahl National Wildlife Refuge
- McLean National Wildlife Refuge
- Shell Lake National Wildlife Refuge
- Stewart Lake National Wildlife Refuge
- Stump Lake National Wildlife Refuge
- White Lake National Wildlife Refuge

The draft CCP was developed in compliance with the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Improvement Act) and Part 602 (National Wildlife Refuge System Planning) of “The Fish and Wildlife Service Manual.” The actions described within

this draft CCP and environmental assessment (EA) meet the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). Compliance with the NEPA is being achieved through involvement of the public.

A planning team of representatives from various Service programs including the divisions of realty, visitor services, and resources; and the North Dakota Game and Fish Department (NDGF) prepared the draft CCP and EA. In addition, the planning team used public input. Public involvement and the planning process are described in section 1.6, “The Planning Process.”

After reviewing a wide range of public comments and management needs, the planning team developed alternatives for management of the refuges. The team recommended one alternative to be the Service’s proposed action, which addresses all substantive issues while determining how best to achieve the purposes of the refuges. The proposed action is the Service’s recommended course of action for management of the refuges. “Chapter 3, Alternatives” summarizes the proposed action, with its predicted effects described in “Chapter 5, Environmental Consequences.” The details of the proposed action compose the draft CCP (chapter 6).

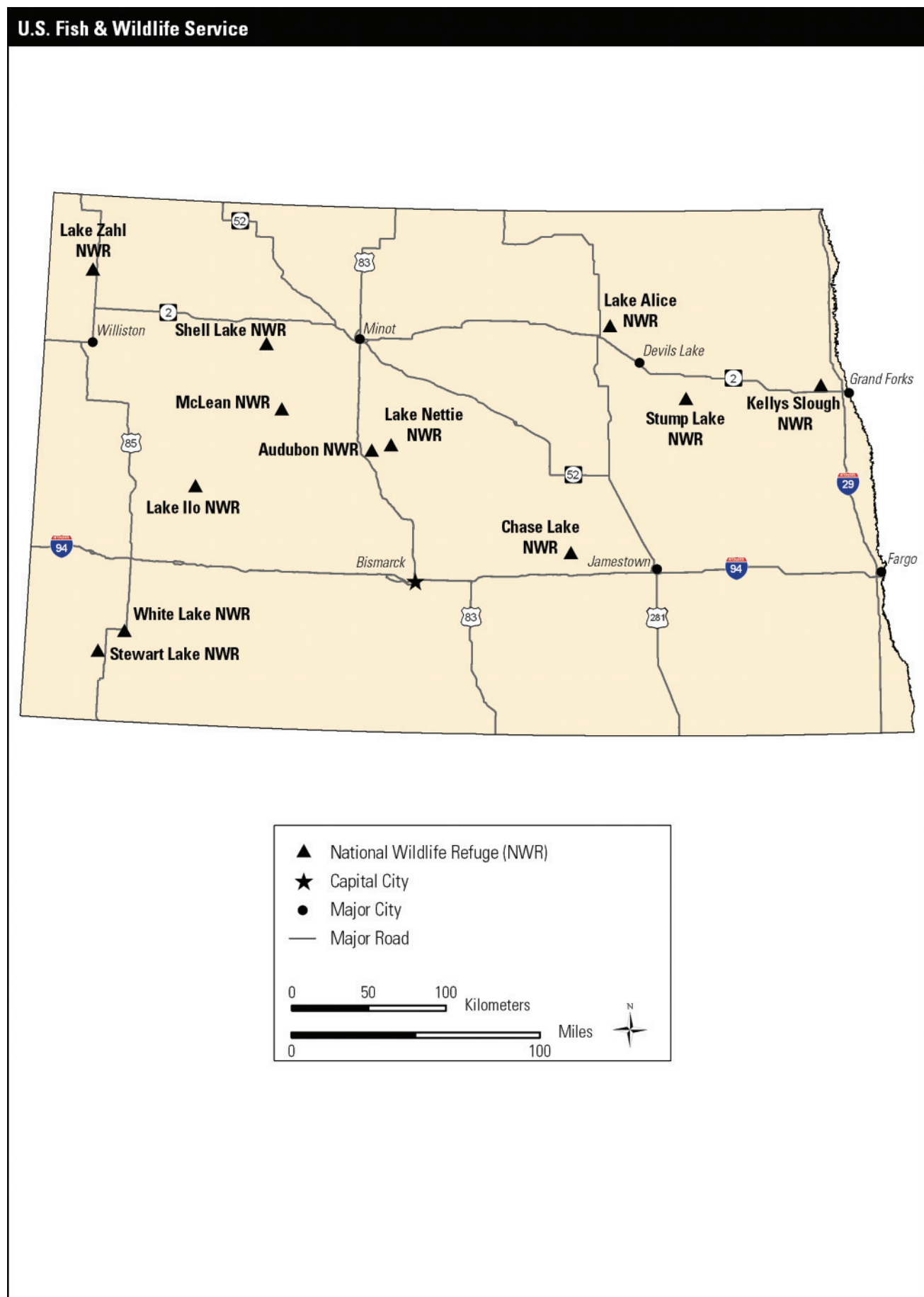


Figure 1. Vicinity map for the 12 refuges, North Dakota.

When finalized, the CCP will serve as a working guide for management programs and actions for the next 15 years. The final CCP will specify the necessary actions to achieve the vision and purposes of the 12 North Dakota refuges. Wildlife is the first priority in refuge management, and the Service allows and encourages wildlife-dependent recreational use as long as it is compatible with the refuges' purposes.

1.1 Purpose and Need for the Plan

The purpose of the draft CCP is to identify the role that the refuges would play in support of the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System) and to provide long-term guidance for management of refuge programs and activities.

The CCP is needed

- to communicate with the public and other partners in efforts to carry out the mission of the Refuge System;
- to provide a clear statement of direction for management of the refuges;
- to provide neighbors, visitors, and government officials with an understanding of the Service's management actions on and around the refuges;
- to ensure that the Service's management actions are consistent with the mandates of the Improvement Act;
- to ensure that management of the refuges is consistent with federal, state, and county plans;
- to provide a basis for development of budget requests for the refuges' operation, maintenance, and capital improvement needs.

Sustaining the nation's fish and wildlife resources is a task that can be accomplished only through the combined efforts of governments, businesses, and private citizens.

1.2 The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Refuge System

The Service is the principal federal agency responsible for fish, wildlife, and plant conservation. The Refuge System is one of the Service's major programs.



U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, working with others, is to conserve, protect, and enhance fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

Over a century ago, America's fish and wildlife resources were declining at an alarming rate. Concerned citizens, scientists, and hunting and angling groups joined together to restore and sustain America's national wildlife heritage. This was the genesis of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Today, the Service enforces federal wildlife laws, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores vital wildlife habitat, protects and recovers endangered species, and helps other governments with conservation efforts. In addition, the Service administers a federal aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars to states for fish and wildlife restoration, boating access, hunter education, and related programs across America.

SERVICE ACTIVITIES IN NORTH DAKOTA

Service activities in North Dakota contribute to the state's economy, ecosystems, and education programs. The following list describes the Service's presence and activities:

- Employs 170 people in North Dakota.
- Helped by 539 volunteers who donated more than 10,200 hours with Service projects.
- Manages two national fish hatcheries and one fish and wildlife management assistance office.
- Manages 65 national wildlife refuges (NWRs) encompassing 343,145 acres (0.8% of the state).
- Manages 11 wetland management districts (WMDs).
 - 284,660 acres of fee waterfowl production areas (0.6% of the state)
 - 1,080,636 wetland acres under various leases or easements (2.4% of the state)
- Hosts more than 385,300 annual visitors to Service-managed lands.
 - 166,908 hunting visits
 - 59,500 fishing visits
 - 26,346 photography visits
- Provided \$3.8 million to the NDGF for sport fish restoration and \$3.9 million for wildlife restoration and hunter education.
- Helped private landowners restore, create, and enhance more than 214,000 acres on 8,400 sites and restore 17 miles of river since 1987 through the Partners for Wildlife Program.

- Employs 11 Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program biologists.
- Paid North Dakota counties \$435,325 under the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act (funds used for schools and roads).

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt designated the 5.5-acre Pelican Island in Florida as the nation's first wildlife refuge for the protection of brown pelicans and other native, nesting birds. This was the first time the federal government set aside land for wildlife. This small but significant designation was the beginning of the Refuge System.

One hundred years later, the Refuge System has become the largest collection of lands in the world specifically managed for wildlife, encompassing more than 96 million acres within 546 refuges and more than 3,000 small areas for waterfowl breeding and nesting. Today, there is at least one refuge in every state including Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

In 1997, the Improvement Act established a clear mission for the Refuge System.

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

The Improvement Act states that each national wildlife refuge shall be managed

- to fulfill the mission of the Refuge System;
- to fulfill the individual purposes of each refuge;
- to consider the needs of fish and wildlife first;
- to fulfill the requirement of developing a CCP for each unit of the Refuge System and fully involve the public in the preparation of these plans;
- to maintain the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of the Refuge System;
- to recognize that wildlife-dependent recreational uses including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, and environmental education and interpretation are legitimate and priority public uses;

to retain the authority of refuge managers to determine compatible public uses.

In addition to the mission for the Refuge System, the wildlife and habitat vision for each unit of the Refuge System stresses the following principles:

- Wildlife comes first.
- Ecosystems, biodiversity, and wilderness are vital concepts in refuge management.
- Habitats must be healthy.
- Growth of refuges must be strategic.
- The Refuge System serves as a model for habitat management with broad participation from others.

Following passage of the Improvement Act, the Service immediately began to carry out the direction of the new legislation, including preparation of CCPs for all national wildlife refuges. Consistent with the Improvement Act, the Service prepares CCPs in conjunction with public involvement. Each refuge is required to complete its CCP within the 15-year schedule (by 2012).

People and the Refuge System

The nation's fish and wildlife heritage contributes to the quality of American lives and is an integral part of the country's greatness. Wildlife and wild places have always given people special opportunities to have fun, relax, and appreciate the natural world.

Whether through bird watching, fishing, hunting, photography, or other wildlife pursuits, wildlife recreation contributes millions of dollars to local economies. In 2002, approximately 35.5 million people visited the Refuge System, mostly to observe wildlife in their natural habitats. Visitors are most often accommodated through nature trails, auto tours, interpretive programs, and hunting and fishing opportunities. Significant economic benefits are generated in the local communities that surround refuges. Economists report that Refuge System visitors contribute more than \$792 million annually to local economies.

1.3 National and Regional Mandates

Refuge System units are managed to achieve the mission and goals of the Refuge System, along with the designated purpose of the refuges (as described in establishing legislation, executive orders, or other establishing documents). Key concepts and guidance of the Refuge System are in the Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (Administration Act), Title 50 of the *Code of Federal Regulations* (CFRs), "The Fish and Wildlife Service Manual," and the Improvement Act.

The Improvement Act amends the Administration Act by providing a unifying mission for the Refuge System, a new process for determining compatible public uses at refuges, and a requirement that each refuge be managed under a CCP. The Improvement Act states that wildlife conservation is the priority for Refuge System lands and that the Secretary of the Interior will ensure that the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of refuge lands are maintained. Each refuge must be managed to fulfill the Refuge System's mission and the specific purposes for which it was established. The Improvement Act requires the Service to monitor the status and trends of fish, wildlife, and plants in each refuge.

A detailed description of these and other laws and executive orders that may affect the CCP or the Service's implementation of the CCP is in appendix A. Service policies on planning and day-to-day management of refuges are in the "Refuge System Manual" and "The Fish and Wildlife Service Manual."

1.4 Refuge Contributions to National and Regional Plans

The North Dakota refuges contribute to the conservation efforts described in this section.

FULFILLING THE PROMISE

A 1999 report, "Fulfilling the Promise, The National Wildlife Refuge System" (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [USFWS] 1999a), is the culmination of a yearlong process by teams of Service employees to evaluate the Refuge System nationwide. This report was the focus of the first national Refuge System conference (in 1998)—attended by refuge managers, other Service employees, and representatives from leading conservation organizations.

The report contains 42 recommendations packaged with three vision statements dealing with wildlife and habitat, people, and leadership. This CCP deals with all three of these major topics. The planning team looked to the recommendations in the document for guidance during CCP planning.

PARTNERS IN FLIGHT

The Partners in Flight program (PIF) began in 1990 with the recognition of declining population levels of many migratory bird species. The challenge, according to the program, is managing human population growth while maintaining functional natural ecosystems. To meet this challenge, PIF worked to identify priority, land bird species and habitat types. PIF activity has resulted in 52 bird conservation plans covering the continental United States.

The primary goal of PIF is to provide for the long-term health of the bird life of this continent. The first

priority is to prevent the rarest species from going extinct. The second priority is to prevent uncommon species from descending into threatened status. The third priority is to "keep common birds common."

PIF splits North America into seven avifaunal biomes (birds of an ecological regional area) and 37 bird conservation regions (BCRs) for planning purposes (see figure 2, map of BCRs). The 12 national wildlife refuges are within the prairie avifaunal biome in BCRs 11 and 17.



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Baird's sparrow is a priority species that breeds in BCR 11.

BCR 11 is the most important waterfowl production area on the North American continent, despite extensive wetland drainage and tillage of native grasslands. The density of breeding dabbling ducks commonly exceeds 100 pairs per square mile in some areas during years with favorable wetland conditions. The area comprises the core of the breeding range of most dabbling duck and several diving duck species. BCR 11 provides critical breeding and migration habitat for more than 200 other bird species, including such species of concern as Franklin's gull and yellow rail and a threatened species, the piping plover. In addition, Baird's sparrow, Sprague's pipit, chestnut-collared longspur, Wilson's phalarope, marbled godwit, and American avocet are among the many priority nonwaterfowl species that breed in BCR 11. According to the NABCI, wetland areas also provide key spring migration sites for Hudsonian godwit, American golden-plover, white-rumped sandpiper, and buff-breasted sandpiper (NABCI 2007).

BCR 17 is dominated by mixed-grass prairie that lies west and south of the glaciated Prairie Pothole Region (see figure 3), east of the Rocky Mountains, and north of the true short-grass prairie. Mostly due to the

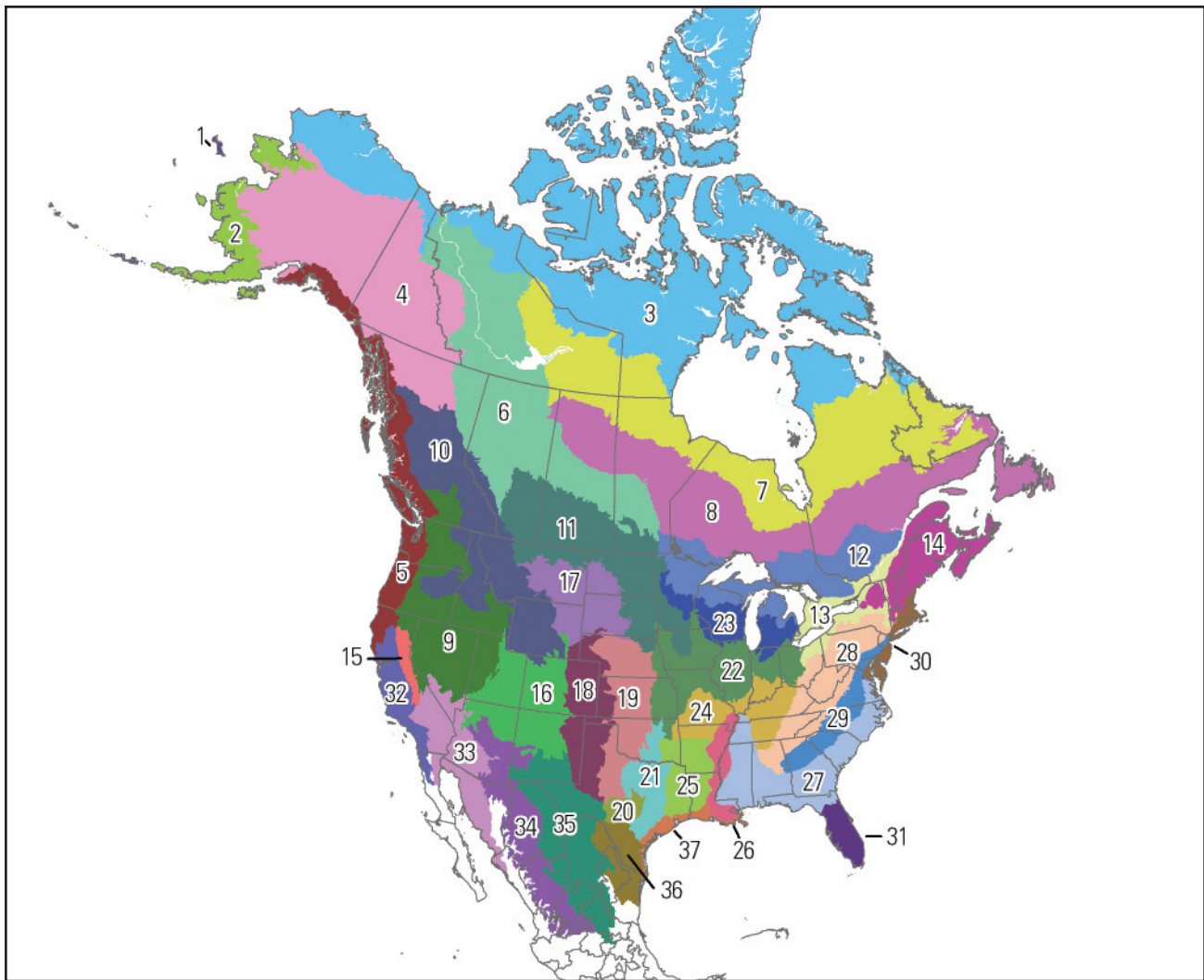


Figure 2. Map of the bird conservation regions of North America.

continued dominance of ranching, many contiguous grassland tracts of significant size persist. As a result, this area is habitat for some of the healthiest populations of high-priority, dry-grassland birds on the continent including mountain plover, McCown's longspur, and long-billed curlew. The relatively small number of wetlands—including small impoundments created to serve as livestock water sources—receives intensive use by upland-nesting waterfowl and broods (NABCI 2007).

PIF conservation priorities in the prairie avifaunal biome focus on protection of remaining prairies, management of existing grasslands with fire and grazing, and control of invasive plants including woody plant encroachment.

NORTH AMERICAN WATERFOWL MANAGEMENT PLAN

Written in 1986, the North American Waterfowl Management Plan envisioned a 15-year effort to achieve landscape conditions that could sustain

waterfowl populations. Specific objectives of the plan are to increase and restore duck populations to the average levels of the 1970s—62 million breeding ducks and a fall flight of 100 million birds.

By 1985, waterfowl populations had plummeted to record lows. Habitat that waterfowl depend on was disappearing at a rate of 60 acres per hour. Recognizing the importance of waterfowl and wetlands to North Americans and the need for international cooperation to help in the recovery of a shared resource, the United States and Canada governments developed a strategy to restore waterfowl populations through habitat protection, restoration, and enhancement. Mexico became a signatory to the plan in 1994.

The plan is innovative because of its international scope, plus its implementation at the regional level. Its success depends on the strength of partnerships called “joint ventures,” which involve federal, state, provincial, tribal, and local governments; businesses; conservation organizations; and individual citizens.



Figure 3. Map of the Prairie Pothole Region of the United States and Canada.

Joint ventures are regional, self-directed partnerships that carry out science-based conservation through community participation. Joint ventures develop implementation plans that focus on areas of concern identified in the plan.

The 9 of the 12 refuges lie within the Prairie Pothole Joint Venture (PPJV), which covers the Prairie Pothole Region of Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Iowa:

- Audubon National Wildlife Refuge
- Chase Lake National Wildlife Refuge
- Kellys Slough National Wildlife Refuge
- Lake Alice National Wildlife Refuge
- Lake Nettie National Wildlife Refuge
- Lake Zahl National Wildlife Refuge
- McLean National Wildlife Refuge
- Shell Lake National Wildlife Refuge
- Stump Lake National Wildlife Refuge

Established in 1987, the PPJV is one of the original six priority joint ventures under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. The joint venture protects, restores, and enhances high-priority wetland and grassland habitat to help sustain populations of waterfowl, shorebirds, waterbirds, and prairie land birds. The PPJV includes one-third (100,000 square miles) of North America's Prairie Pothole Region. The remaining 200,000 acres is located in the Canadian provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. This unique area contains millions of depressional wetlands ("potholes") that constitute one of the richest wetland systems in the world. These glacially formed prairie potholes and their surrounding grasslands are highly productive and support an incredible diversity of bird life.

PPJV IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

The Prairie Pothole Region remains the most important waterfowl-producing region on the continent, generating more than half of North America's ducks. Nearly 15% of the continental waterfowl population comes from the PPJV region (Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Iowa). As many as 10 million ducks and 2 million geese use the PPJV region during migration or for nesting. The wetlands and associated grassland habitat in the PPJV region provide breeding habitat to more than 200 species of migratory birds. Bald eagles, peregrine falcons, whooping cranes, piping plovers, and interior least terns frequent the PPJV region during migration and breeding periods.

The PPJV implementation plan was prepared in 2005 and outlined a mission, goals, objectives, and strategies for joint venture activities. Individual state action groups and steering committees prepared state action

plans that "stepped down" joint venture activities to the state and local level.

The goal of the PPJV is to increase waterfowl populations through habitat conservation projects that improve natural diversity across the prairie pothole landscape of the United States. The joint venture attempts to carry out landscape-level habitat projects so that waterfowl populations increase during the wet years and stabilize under moderate conditions. Since little can be done to stabilize the breeding populations across the Prairie Pothole Region during extended drought, joint venture strategies are designed to carry out actions that take advantage of years when precipitation is at least normal.

NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS JOINT VENTURE IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

The Northern Great Plains Joint Venture (NGPJV) project area lies between the Missouri River on the east and north, the foothills of the Rocky Mountains on the west, and the sand hills and playa lakes of Wyoming and Nebraska on the south. Three of the 12 refuges are in the NGPJV:

- Lake Ilo National Wildlife Refuge
- Stewart Lake National Wildlife Refuge
- White Lake National Wildlife Refuge

The primary purpose of the NGPJV is to contribute to the attainment of continental population goals (developed under the NABCI) by strategically conserving habitat within the northern Great Plains ecosystem. The NGPJV partnership embraces the goals of NABCI "to deliver the full spectrum of bird conservation through regionally based, biologically driven, landscape-oriented partnerships." The goal of the NGPJV is to maintain and increase populations of the high-priority bird species in the grassland, wetland, riparian, and forest habitats within the NGPJV.

The uniqueness of the northern Great Plains is its arid climate and relatively intact, grassland-dominated landscape. Within this landscape are habitats that have significant value to species of the northern Great Plains; these habitats include big sagebrush areas in Wyoming and Montana, short-grass prairie of the Conata Basin in South Dakota, and riparian corridors in the badlands of North Dakota and South Dakota. It is this variety of habitat types within the larger grassland context that supports such a diversity of birds—from raptors such as the ferruginous hawk and golden eagle, to waterfowl and shorebirds like the northern pintail and piping plover, and declining grassland birds such as Baird's sparrow and McCown's longspur.

The NGPJV implementation plan (Pool and Austin 2006) has a mission to seek new opportunities and foster new partnerships while strengthening existing alliances for the protection, enhancement, and

restoration of prairie, wetland, riparian, and forest ecosystems. These conservation actions will place an emphasis on sustaining and increasing populations of migratory birds and resident birds, consistent with bird conservation objectives in regional, national, and international plans.

RECOVERY PLANS FOR FEDERALLY LISTED THREATENED OR ENDANGERED SPECIES

Where federally listed threatened or endangered species occur at the 12 refuges, the Service will follow management goals and strategies in the species' recovery plans. The list of threatened or endangered species that occur at the refuges will change as species are listed or delisted, or as listed species are discovered on refuge lands.

The refuges are following the recovery plans for the following species:

- piping plover (threatened) in the northern Great Plains (USFWS 1994a)
- whooping crane (endangered) (USFWS 1994b)
- interior least tern (endangered) (USFWS 1990)
- western prairie fringed orchid (threatened) (USFWS 1996)

STATE COMPREHENSIVE CONSERVATION WILDLIFE STRATEGY

Over the past several decades, documented declines of wildlife populations have occurred nationwide. Congress created the State Wildlife Grant (SWG) program in 2001. This program provides states and territories with federal dollars to support conservation aimed at preventing wildlife from becoming endangered and in need of protection under the Endangered Species Act. The SWG program represents an ambitious endeavor to take an active hand in keeping species from becoming threatened or endangered in the future.

According to the SWG program, each state, territory, and the District of Columbia must complete a comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy (CWCS) by October 1, 2005 to receive future funding.

These strategies will help define an integrated approach to the stewardship of all wildlife species, with additional emphasis on species of concern and habitats at risk. The goal is to shift focus from single-species management and highly specialized individual efforts to a geographically based, landscape-oriented, fish and wildlife conservation effort. The Service approves these plans and administers SWG program funding.

North Dakota's CWCS is a strategic vision with the goal of preserving the state's wildlife diversity. It is intended to identify species of greatest conservation need, provide fundamental background information, strategic guidance, and a framework for developing

and coordinating conservation actions to safeguard all fish and wildlife resources.

The state of North Dakota has taken a landscape approach to conservation planning, which has numerous advantages. It allows the state to link species requiring conservation to a key landscape and habitat, often within a specific geographic area. This approach also provides a comprehensive listing of all other fish and wildlife using the landscape, while providing relative plant and soil conditions applicable to the landscape. A landscape approach helps to identify corresponding conservation actions needed across the landscape, along with the potential partners who are or could be addressing them. Three tools are used to identify landscape components: land cover information, ecoregions, and statistical models. Ecoregions were defined based on general similarity of geology, physiography, vegetation, climate, soils, land use, wildlife, and hydrology. The CWCS recognizes four ecoregions commonly referred to as the Red River Valley, Drift Prairie, Missouri Coteau, and Missouri Slope.

The CWCS identified conservation problems encountered in North Dakota that apply to all four of the ecoregions. Direct loss of habitat is a key issue because very little, native, tall-grass prairie remains in the state. The conservation action will be to protect native tall-grass prairie where possible.

Habitat fragmentation is occurring throughout the state due to construction of roads, shelterbelts, and agricultural practices. Actions will include the removal of dilapidated shelterbelts or stands of trees within grasslands. Habitat degradation occurring from improper grazing practices and loss of the historical fire regime can be fixed by carrying out grazing systems to benefit tall-grass species and promoting the use of fire. Other actions include extending the time between haying and grazing, promoting mid-term required management, and providing incentives to defer or idle cutting of tame grass (cultivated, nonnative grass such as smooth brome). Invasive plants, including noxious weeds such as leafy spurge, will be controlled through biological and chemical methods.

The CWCS for the state of North Dakota was reviewed and information was used during development of the draft CCP. Carrying out CCP habitat goals and objectives will support the goals and objectives of the CWCS.

1.5 Ecosystem Description and Threats

The Service has adopted watersheds as the basic building blocks for carrying out ecosystem conservation. The refuges span two Service-designated ecosystems—the Missouri River main stem ecosystem and the Hudson Bay ecosystem—with the majority falling within the former (see figure 4, ecosystem map).

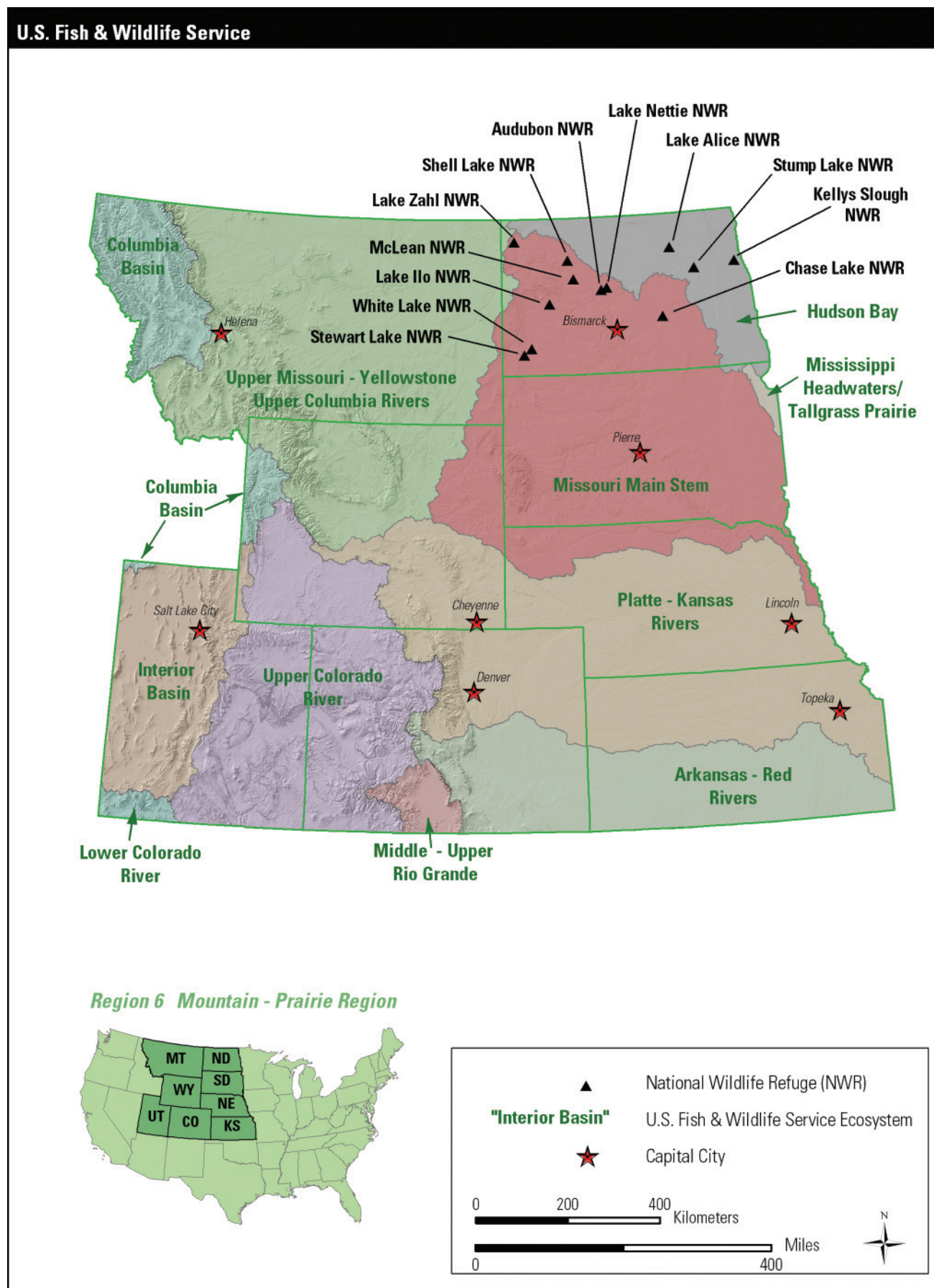


Figure 4. Map of ecosystems in region 6 of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Major threats identified for these ecosystems include native prairie conversion to cropland, expansion of invasive plant species, and wetland drainage and degradation. The refuges play a major role in (1) continued leadership and support of regional initiatives such as the PPJV, and (2) continued support of our conservation partners including the NDGF and private organizations such as Ducks Unlimited. In addition, the Service is continually working with private landowners through the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program to restore and improve grassland and wetland habitats on private lands.

1.6 Planning Process

This draft CCP and the EA for the refuges is intended to comply with the Improvement Act, the NEPA, and the implementing regulations of the acts. The Service issued its Refuge System planning policy in 2000. This policy established requirements and guidance for refuge and refuge plans—including CCPs and step-down management plans—to ensure that planning efforts comply with the Improvement Act. The planning policy identified several steps of the CCP and environmental analysis process (see figure 5, steps in the planning process).

Figure 5 displays the planning process to date for this draft CCP and EA. The Service began the preplanning process in August 2006. The planning team is Service

personnel from the affected North Dakota refuges, the regional divisions of refuge planning and visitor services, and the NDGF (see appendix B, preparers and contributors). During preplanning, the team developed a mailing list, internal issues, and a special qualities list. The planning team identified current refuge program status, compiled and analyzed relevant data, and determined the purposes of the refuges. Table 1 summarizes accomplishment of the main planning steps for this CCP effort.

Scoping is the process of obtaining information from the public for input into the planning process.

Over the course of preplanning and scoping, the planning team collected available information about the resources of the refuges and surrounding areas. “Chapter 4, Affected Environment” summarizes this information.

The draft CCP (chapter 6) outlines long-term guidance for management decisions, sets forth proposed objectives and strategies to accomplish refuge purposes and meet goals, and identifies the Service’s best estimate of future needs.

The draft CCP details program levels that are sometimes substantially above current budget allocations and, as such, are primarily for Service strategic planning purposes.

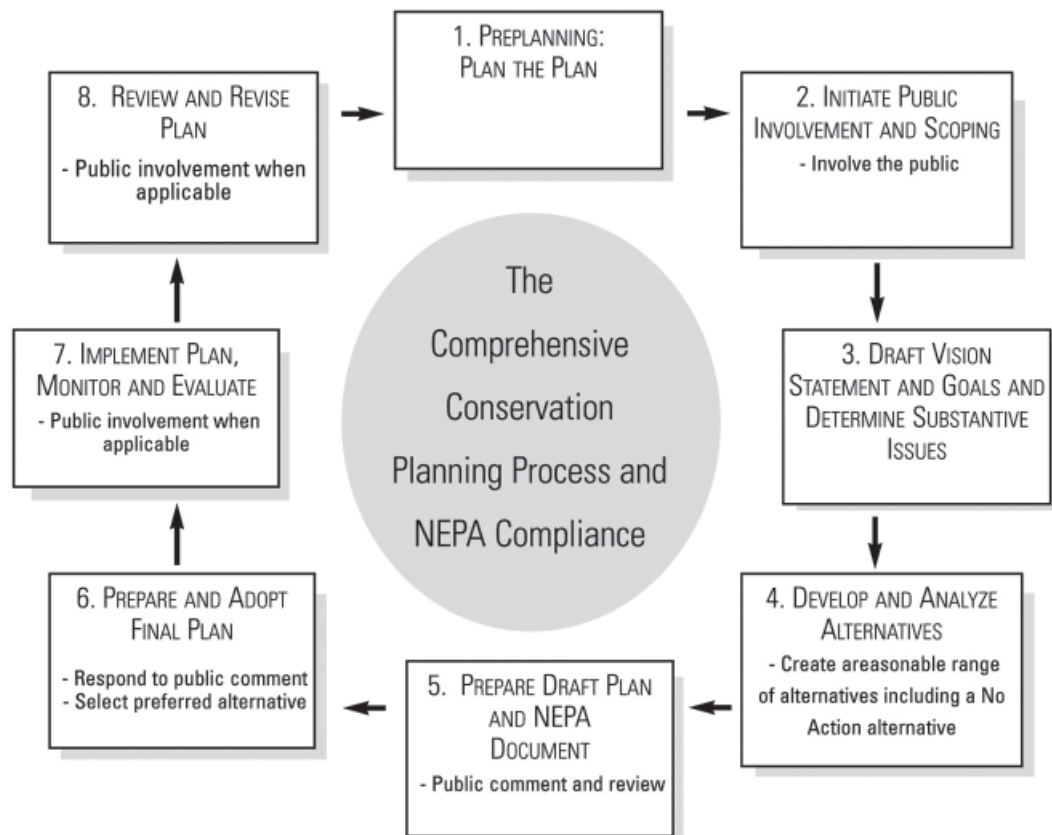


Figure 5. Steps in the planning process.

Table 1. Planning Process Summary for the 12 Refuges, North Dakota.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Outcome</i>
May 2006	Initial meeting with North Dakota project leaders.	CCP overview.
August 2006	Meeting with refuge staffs and field review.	Planning team was finalized; biological and visitor services issues were reviewed.
December 2006	Kick off meeting, initial development of vision and goals.	Refuge purposes were identified; initial issues and qualities list was developed; mailing list was started; biological and mapping needs were identified; and public scoping was planned.
February 2007	Public notice of intent to prepare a CCP.	Notice was published in the <i>Federal Register</i> .
March 2007	Initial public contact through mailing of the first planning update.	Public opportunity was offered (to learn about the CCP and provide comments); planning update described the CCP process and provided comment forms and postage-paid envelopes mailed.
March–April 2007	Public meetings.	Public opportunity was offered (to learn about the CCP and provide comments).
March–April 2007	Alternatives development.	Alternatives for refuge management were developed and drafted by the planning team.
February–May 2007	Development of biological objectives.	Objectives and strategies were developed and drafted by the planning team for the biological aspects of refuge management.
June–July 2007	Development of visitor services objectives.	Objectives and strategies were developed and drafted by the planning team for the visitor services at the refuges.
May 2008	Internal review of the draft plan.	Draft plan was reviewed by the Service's regional staff.
August 2008	Draft plan released for public review.	Revised draft plan was published for review by the public.

A notice of intent to prepare the draft CCP and EA was published in the *Federal Register* on February 28, 2007. Public scoping began in April 2007 with a planning update and comment form mailed to interested parties in March 2007.

COORDINATION WITH THE PUBLIC

A mailing list of more than 1,025 names includes private citizens; local, regional, and state government representatives and legislators; other federal agencies; and interested organizations (see appendix C, public involvement).

In April 2007, the first planning update issue was sent to everyone on the mailing list. The planning update provided information about the history of the refuges and the CCP process, along with an invitation to public scoping meetings. The planning update included a comment form and postage-paid envelope to give the

public an opportunity to easily provide written comments. The local media also announced the public meetings.

The Service held six public scoping meetings during March–April 2007 (see table 1 for details). After a presentation about the refuges, along with an overview of the CCP and NEPA processes, attendees were encouraged to ask questions and offer comments. Service employees were available after the presentation to answer individual questions about the CCP process and the refuge management overview. Each attendee was given a comment form to submit additional thoughts or questions in writing.

The Service received 25 written comments throughout the scoping process. Input obtained from meetings and correspondence, including emails, were considered in development of this draft CCP and EA.

STATE COORDINATION

On September 12, 2006, an invitation letter to participate in the CCP process was sent by the Service's region 6 director to the director of the NDGF. Two representatives from the NDGF are part of the CCP planning team. Local NDGF wildlife managers and the refuge staffs maintain excellent and ongoing working relations that precede the start of the CCP process.

The NDGF's mission is to "protect, conserve, and enhance fish and wildlife populations and their habitats for sustained public consumptive and nonconsumptive uses." The NDGF is responsible for managing natural resource lands owned by the state, in addition to enforcement responsibilities for the state's migratory birds and endangered species. The state manages more than 78,000 acres in support of wildlife, recreation, and fisheries.

TRIBAL COORDINATION

On October 19, 2006, the Service's region 6 director sent a letter to six Native American tribal governments in North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota:

Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate, Spirit Lake Tribal Council, Standing Rock Sioux, Three Affiliated Tribes, White Earth Band of Chippewa, and Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. With information about the upcoming CCP, the letter invited tribal recipients to serve on the planning team. None of the tribes expressed interest in participating in the process.

RESULTS OF SCOPING

Table 1 (previous) summarizes all scoping activities. Comments collected from scoping meetings and correspondence, including comment forms, were used in the development of a final list of issues addressed in this draft CCP and EA.

The Service determined which alternatives could best address these issues. The planning process ensures that issues with the greatest effect on the refuges are resolved or given priority over the life of the final CCP. "Chapter 2, The Refuges" summarizes the identified issues, along with a discussion of effects on resources.

In addition, the Service considered suggested changes to current refuge management that were presented by the public and other groups.

